September 12, 2001
ONE COMMUNITY CRIES OUT TO GOD, REACHES OUT TO ONE ANOTHER

NEWBURYPORT, Mass. - News of hijacked airplanes and crumbling buildings had barely arrived here when church doors across town literally swung open and pastors taped up hand-written notes.

"Our sanctuary is open today for prayer," read the splotchy blue ink on white paper at the entrance of Central Congregational Church. Response was unlike any Senior Minister Kent Allen had seen in 20 years of ministry: dozens of unknown passersby in this reticent corner of New England accepted the invitation, stopped and prayed.

Like communities across the nation, this city of 22,000 and its neighbors grasped for solid ground on a day when symbols of stability turned to flames and rubble. Amid the chaos, inhibitions came down as cries to God and to one another went up.

"I don't go to church regularly, but I had a strong urge to go to church today," said Kathy Withington of Newburyport. She didn't get there, she said, because her house was full of friends who wanted to be together, but at dusk she broke away to join 100 others in the city center for an interfaith vigil.

Somber gatherings at night were but the capstone, however, on a daylong blizzard of calls to pastors, friends and names on prayer chain lists. Allen fielded 30 calls Tuesday morning from souls seeking information, assurance and prayers. He learned of a friend, stranded in Los Angeles, who rented a car Tuesday afternoon and began the 3,000-mile drive home to his family in Newbury, Mass.

"We've never had to deal with anything like that before," Allen said.

On normal days, the prayer team at Community United Methodist Church in Byfield, Mass. remembers the sick in their private time. But Tuesday morning, they mobilized to determine whether any of their congregation's regular business travelers had been aboard one of two hijacked flights from Boston, just 35 miles away.

There had been a close call. One church member was thought to be on American Airlines Flight 11. Unbeknownst to his wife, he changed plans at the last minute and called her from Toronto, where he had been re-routed. A panicked church heaved sighs of relief.

"A few couples came by the house because they wanted a hug," said Pastor David Kerr.

Bracing for an onslaught of grief and fear, 13 pastors from area churches held an emergency meeting at 1 p.m. with military-style efficiency. Within 30 minutes, they had organized outdoor vigils for three consecutive nights at 6 p.m. and arranged to urge every area church to keep its doors open day and night.

Professionalism aside, pastors around the table confided their own unease.

"This doesn't seem real to me," said Rev. Robert Hagopian, Pastor of First Congregational Church in Rowley.

"After Pearl Harbor, the whole nation was totally changed and then we went to war," said Rev. William Murdoch, Rector of All Saints Episcopal Church in West Newbury. "That's exactly what this feels like."

"I'm a mother of four, and I'm really concerned to be with my kids," said Rev. Laura Biddle, Associate Minister at Central Congregational. "They might want to just come home and cuddle."

After schools let out, parents found their children confused by what had happened. Julie Cohen's four-year-old son asked her, "Can God be everywhere today?" and "Did God get hurt?"
"That's when I said 'it's time to stop and pray,'" Cohen said on a park bench after the vigil. "We prayed together, thanking God that daddy wasn't on that plane and saying we know God will be everywhere in the people who are helping today."

As the sun went down, a public gazebo across the Merrimac River in Amesbury lit up with candles of 35 adults and children who formed a shoulder-to-shoulder, wordless circle. Rev. Michael Shirley of St. James Episcopal Church broke 15 minutes of silence with a reminder for all to temper their own impulses.

"All across this nation tonight, people of Middle Eastern descent are living in fear," Shirley said. "Let us remember all those who came to this country from the Middle East."

"We're already hearing people in town say, 'the Palestinians are excited'" about the attack, Biddle said. "We must not do that. She instead urged a disciplined response of "non-stereotyping, compassion, empathy and non-retaliation."

Back in Newburyport, 65-year-old Onalee Cooke hosed down a church flower garden as she waited to see who might turn out at the church.

"Having a community kind of helps with the fear element," Cooke said reflectively, as water puddled around her. "If the world sees that [community] is what America is all about, then the world might somehow be healed."

Inside, a choir gathered for its usual Tuesday night rehearsal, but no one felt like singing. Instead, they prayed, vented their disbelief about the day's events and read aloud from Psalm 23.

"Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil," they said together. "For thou art with me."

Then they sang.
April 9, 2001

CHRISTIANS FINDING NEW WAYS TO MARK LENT

A foot-washing professor, a Bible-reading secretary and a volunteering professional have vastly different ways of marking this time of year, but they all call it the same thing: Lenten sacrifice.

Since Ash Wednesday on Feb. 28, Christians have borne the burdens of special disciplines in observance of Lent. The 40-day period of preparation for Easter climaxes on April 15 with the celebration of Christ's resurrection.

For prior generations, the ascetic duties of Lent received emphasis only among Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox and "high church" Protestants, such as Lutherans and Episcopalians. For them, the sacrificial triad traditionally consisted of fasting, prayer and giving alms.

But as more and more Christians lay claim to the season's rituals, the definition of "sacrifice" is expanding to include everything from fasting alone in Bridgeport, Conn. to power lunching with the Bible open on Wall Street. What a Christian does to sacrifice now has less to do with denomination, it seems, and more to do with ethnicity and class.

"I think there are a lot of people finding new ways of sacrificing," said the Rev. David Rowe, pastor of the mostly white, upper-middle class Greenfield Hill Congregational Church in Fairfield, Conn. "It's not sacrifice in the classic, Ash Wednesday sense of, 'I'm giving up smoking,' but rather, 'I'm giving up something of myself and taking on some new spiritual commitments in Lent.'"

Example: professionals in his congregation are doing more than receiving ashes on Ash Wednesday, a practice that began at the church in 1997. They auctioned off possessions and time in March to raise $7,000 for a teenager mission trip to Appalachia this summer. To schedule time off for such a trip, he said, represents a "genuine sacrifice" on the part of the 30 adults and 100 teenagers who will renovate homes for a week in West Virginia or Kentucky.

In nearby Bridgeport, however, both Catholic and Protestant people of color are observing Lent through a more traditional style of self-denial. Colombian native Yolanda Soto, a Roman Catholic, skips breakfast every day during Lent, shuns television and reads a Biblical account of Jesus' crucifixion each day at 8 a.m.

"The Latino soul is different from the Anglo soul," said Soto's priest, Monsignor Aliceto Villamide of St. Peter's Church in Bridgeport. Latinos "have experienced oppression and suffering in their experience, so they identify with the suffering Christ... Self-denial and fasting are important ways of imitating Christ, who saved us by his passion and death on the cross."

But Catholics aren't the only ones abstaining from pleasure. Protestant minority churches also practice an ascetic piety in Lent.

At the mostly black East End Baptist Tabernacle Church in Bridgeport, the Rev. Vernon Thompson says members use Lent to give up bad habits and to draw together. On Wednesdays, for instance, the whole church refrains from eating until sundown. The purpose, he says, is twofold: to repent for past sins and to build strength to fight systemic injustice against blacks.

"How do we get strong enough to defend ourselves in a Christian way?" Thompson asked. "Self-discipline has a lot to do with it."

Meanwhile, at the integrated but mostly white First & Summerfield United Methodist Church in New Haven, Rev. Kevan Hitch gives a brief pep-talk on Ash Wednesday to those who might forego pleasures during Lent. But, he says, his parishioners are more inclined to share testimonies in a Lenten devotional booklet than to become 40-day Spartans.
"I don't know anyone who has given anything up for Lent," Hitch said. "It's kind of a big joke." Even he doesn't make Lenten sacrifices, he said.

Hitch noted, however, that newly added worship rituals, such as the imposition of ashes, have surged in popularity and something to me." Rowe's church has bulged with interest, too, as the number coming forward to get ashes jumped from 30 in 1997 to more than 100 this year.

But at St. Barbara Greek Orthodox Church in Orange, Conn., rituals aren't complete without strict codes for fasting. There, where the majority is of Greek descent and others generally claim Eastern European ancestry, members fast all day, and almost everyone shuns meat during Lent. On certain days, all church members fast all day, and "We deny ourse...}
November 13, 2001

SCHOLARS: RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE CAN BREED CULTURAL RESENTMENT

SOUTH BOSTON, Mass. -- Religious tolerance might be an unquestioned virtue in America, but to promote it as a way of life across the globe is apt to breed resentment among numerous local cultures.

That message, though seldom heard in public celebrations of religious diversity, received serious consideration this month from panels of religion and international policy experts. Panelists have roundly applauded the goal of promoting religious tolerance abroad, but they acknowledged that the price of doing so is getting higher all the time.

“For Christians, freedom of religious expression means freedom to proselytize, and that isn’t anything Muslims are going to embrace anytime soon,” said Stephen O’Leary, associate professor of communications at the University of Southern California. “We can expect more conflicts, violence and executions as Christians go out to fulfill the Great Commission [to baptize all nations] and Muslim authorities do the best they can to maintain the integrity of their cultures.”

Christian breaches of etiquette might explain some backlashes to religious multiculturalism, but experts say local cultures often oppose religious tolerance for other reasons as well. A variety of religious groups in rural Africa, for instance, have acquired photocopiing and audiocassette recording equipment over the past 10 years and used them to diminish opposing voices, according to Rosalind Hackett, Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Tennessee.

“That’s where the hate speech is,” Hackett said. “That low-level technology is so empowering, but it’s also incredibly dangerous.”

O’Leary and Hackett offered their comments at a conference on “Challenges of the New Media Order” at Harvard University’s Center for the Study of World Religions. Participants noted how the Internet has enabled some religious minorities, such as the Falun Gong in China, to endure despite opposition. Meanwhile, the Chinese government has also used a Web presence to condemn the Falun Gong and advance its own Communist agenda.

Practical issues aside, much of the world remains philosophically opposed to religious tolerance insofar as such a policy suggests all faiths might be equal and legitimate.

“This is actually a huge debate within Islam,” said Professor Leila Ahmed, author of “Women and Gender in Islam” and an Islamic scholar at Harvard Divinity School. “Are all religions equal and deserving equal treatment? Or are they less than Islam?” The Muslim world, she said, is deeply divided in how to answer that question.

Ahmed joined a panel at the John F. Kennedy Library here to discuss “Promoting Religious Tolerance in the Face of Religiously Motivated Terrorism.” Before an overflow crowd, the panel once again shared a goal of defending the freedom of religious minorities abroad, a long-standing hallmark of U.S. foreign policy. But how to do so in the many nations that sanction one state religion, unlike the United States, emerged in discussion as a formidable delicate challenge for a country that already has severe image problems overseas.
The United States need not feel obliged to end state-sponsored religion in other countries in order to promote religious tolerance, according to J. Bryan Hehir, a Roman Catholic priest and Dean of Harvard Divinity School.

"Religious tolerance is not about judging the truth between different religions," Hehir said. "You can install a dominant religion as long as you honor the rights of religious minorities."

Hehir went on to explain that the notion of religious tolerance stems from the assumption that one official, national religion "tolerates" others by not persecuting them. He said the United States ought to "shoot for a higher goal" in which many religious voices are welcome and encouraged.

Whether other countries with very different histories will ever share that vision remains to be seen. But one thing seems certain: convincing the world to practice religious tolerance will depend on America's ability to sell its own belief system, in which tolerance ranks as a virtue.
July 9, 2001
THEOLOGIAN-TURNED-MAYOR CREDITED WITH TURNING CITY AROUND

HAVERHILL, Mass. - In 1993, Boston College theologian James A. Rurak quit his job among the academic elite in order to run for mayor of this working-class, post-industrial city.

"At the time, nobody ever said they were from Haverhill," said Rev. Thomas Bentley, operator of a local homeless shelter and 40-year friend of Rurak. "You said you were from this neighborhood or that neighborhood, anywhere but Haverhill." With a chemical stench in the air and a polluted river, Bentley said, "the city had had 40 years of a no-can-do attitude."

Eight years later, Haverhill still struggles to house the indigent, support a costly public hospital and bring its downtown facade out of the 1950s. But a spate of new home construction and new shops in this city of 60,000 underscores a surge in local pride that many associate with the theologian-turned-mayor, who is stepping down this year.

Through four consecutive terms in office, Rurak says he hasn't "worn on the sleeve" his expertise in theology or his steadfast Roman Catholic faith. When questioned on the street, several constituents said they didn't know their mayor was a theologian.

But Rurak says theology has nonetheless propelled much of what he's done in office and shaped how he's handled the rough-and-tumble of gritty local politics.

"I've survived longer now than anybody in Haverhill [politics]. . . sometimes by being as cunning as a serpent," Rurak said in a reference to Jesus' admonition in Matthew 10:16. "But I'm not perfect. I make mistakes. I do things that I regret. But if you acknowledge that, there's a rejuvenation that comes from God. . . There have been times when I could never have gotten up again without the sense that God loves me."

Rurak has brought a bit of irony as well as faith into the mayor's office because he originally chose theology as a vocational alternative to a life in politics. His devout Catholic father had represented Haverhill in the Massachusetts Senate for 18 years, and the teenage Rurak discovered what he calls "liberal theology" as a way to chart a course of his own.

"Some people were rebelling by drinking beer at an early age," Rurak said behind an office door that reads, 'gone fishing.' "I was reading Paul Tillich."

Rurak's preoccupation with "the ground of being" and philosophical ethics led to a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and appointments at Texas Christian University and Boston College. But he says he grew weary of the "aristocratic mindset" of academia.

"That probably is what did push me out, is that I did sense a certain condescension in the academy for the common human being and his or her failings," Rurak said. "If they would only listen to us - you get a lot of that in academic camps . . . but life is a series of struggles and compromises and recognizing that someone, even on the opposite side, might have something to contribute."

Colleagues were not surprised at Rurak's unorthodox career move.

"It was completely in keeping with his character," said Stephen J. Pope, Chair of the Theology Department at Boston College. "He is a very free person, not driven by security or ambition. . . It made perfect sense for him to go and use his talents in a way that would be of great benefit."

In his first campaign, Rurak's advertisements touted him as a theology professor.

For Rurak, though, a vision for the city emerged directly from his theological understanding. Balance is a key principle within God's natural law, he said, and is likewise a cornerstone of good public policy.

"People told me, 'you should be an education mayor or a public safety mayor. Get an earmark','" Rurak said. "I said 'no, the city needs to rise on all levels'... The key is balance, particularly between [a protected supply of] water and growth."

City politics, Rurak found, can be a balancing act of its own. Police and fire departments, grade schools, a hospital and a now-defunct community college all have sensitive constituencies. But Bentley said the theologian went further than his predecessors to create effective, though at times unholy, alliances.

"He successfully worked with some of the less respected power brokers in the city," Bentley said. "He's an intelligent, deeply caring person who understands how to work with power. He could do what had to be done to anybody or with anybody, including his old friends."

Rurak's reviews on the street are, of course, mixed. Photography shop owner Michel vanRavestyn said Haverhill was "run down" when he moved here in 1993, but by 1999 it had improved enough that he dared launch a downtown business.

"I think downtown is up and coming, and [Rurak] had a lot to do with that," vanRavestyn said.

"It wouldn't make a difference to me if he was the Pope," said Sandy Howard, a lifelong Haverhill resident who says her property taxes went up $150 this year. "I'm just not happy with the way things are going."

Rurak says he hasn't decided what to do next. He has book projects he could revive, he said, and he hasn't ruled out a return to academia. But if he goes back, it will be with a word of advice for his fellow theologians from the school of life experience.

"They should have more trust in the human struggle," Rurak said. "People who look like they're are out there making mistakes aren't necessarily making mistakes. They may be making progress that the academy hasn't picked up on yet."
September 24, 2001
IN CRISIS, AMERICA TURNED TO PSALM 46 FOR WORDS FOR THE UNSPEAKABLE

Ever since jaws dropped and tears fell in the aftermath of this month's terror, Americans from coast to coast have searched their Bibles for words to address the unspeakable.

They've had choices galore among passages promising comfort in times of trouble. Yet one selection has surfaced continually in discussion venues from the church basement to the halls of Congress: Psalm 46.

On America's ever-more-diverse religious landscape, few occasions in recent years have led believers of varied stripes to invoke a common text as relevant and authoritative. In the aftermath of strikes on the Pentagon and World Trade Center, however, nary a soul disputed the appropriateness of these ancient Hebrew lyrics.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble," reads verse one. "Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change."

Reading those opening lines within hours of the attack, Rev. Dr. Nancy S. Taylor sent the full psalm via e-mail to all 432 congregations who seek her counsel as Massachusetts Conference Minister for the United Church of Christ.

"The images in the psalm were all true" on the day of the strikes, Taylor said. "We all woke up Wednesday (Sept. 12) to a changed earth and a changed world."

Across the grieving land, Psalm 46 seemed to demand a hearing. In Los Angeles, Methodist Bishop Jonathan Keaton of East Ohio quoted it to a gathering of church leaders, saying it "came to me as a source of strength as I woke this morning in my hotel room." At a Santa Fe meeting, directors at Church World Service chose the first three verses to accompany a public notice of disaster relief. In Washington D.C., just a few miles from the burning Pentagon, Chaplain Lloyd Ogilvie read the psalm aloud on the floor of the United States Senate.

Although Psalm 23 is probably better known, pastors and professors say three factors made Psalm 46 the text of choice in America's darkest hour: familiarity, applicability and inclusiveness.

Rev. Earl Alger of Union Congregational Church in Braintree, Mass. uses Psalm 46 regularly at funerals and preached from it in 1996 after a bomb went off at the Atlanta Olympics. But in the aftermath of this month's terrorist attacks, he took the psalm on the road, reading it aloud in several nursing homes. Many hearers had memorized it in their youth.

"I would read the first few words, and they would finish the line," Alger said. Nearly everyone knew the first verse, he said, as well as the tenth, which begins: "Be still, and know that I am God."

Psalm 23 might have struck as many chords with its classic line for sorrowful occasions, "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me." But Psalm 46 had the distinctive advantage on this occasion of allowing its speakers to use the "we" voice as gatherings cried out to God together.

"It's plural as opposed to the singular in Psalm 23," said Randall O'Brien, Professor of Old Testament at Baylor University. "Psalm 46 calls us to corporate reflection - 'WE will not fear though the earth should change'."

Psalm 46 perplexes Biblical scholars: they don't know when it was written or who wrote it, O'Brien said. It might date back to 500 B.C. - or 700 B.C. - and could have had its birth during any number of disasters. Yet its lack of particularity markers is precisely what makes it adaptable, O'Brien said, to circumstances as modern as hijacked airplanes.
For those hearing Psalm 46 for the first time this month, its contrast between a crumbling earth and a protective God offered a new lens for seeing the horror. Peter Simmons of Newbury, Mass. discovered the psalm during an impromptu prayer service at Union Congregational Church in Amesbury, Mass.

"To me it says, 'eventually the nations crumble in concert with what God is doing on the earth'," Simmons said. "To us, this is a major setback, but in God's world, this would be a tiny spec."

Purists, according to O'Brien, say Psalm 46 isn't really everyone's prayer because it promises refuge only for the new Israel, i.e., the spiritual body of Christian believers.

"Technically speaking, the entire nation is not qualified to pray this," O'Brien said. But even purists tend to grant exceptions in times of crisis.

"What we really wanted to know was that God was with us," O'Brien said. "This psalm assures us that in times of catastrophic tragedy, God will preserve His people."
September 24, 2001
SIDEBAR: THE TEXT OF PSALM 46

God is our refuge and strength,
a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change,
though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea;
though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult.
There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God,
the holy habitation of the Most High.
God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved;
God will help her right early.
The nations rage, the kingdoms totter;
he utters his voice, the earth melts.
The Lord of hosts is with us;
the God of Jacob is our refuge.
Come, behold the works of the Lord,
how he has wrought desolations in the earth.
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear,
he burns the chariots with fire!
"Be still and know that I am God.
I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!"
The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.
(Editors: Text is from the Revised Standard Version)